Consider the Camel: 3 Ways to Build a Resilient Business

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Consider the camel.

This desert mammal might not be the most attractive creature. But a camel is built to last. Unlike other animals, camels can withstand extreme changes in body temperature and water consumption. You probably picture camels in the scorching, dry desert — but they can also survive in frigid mountain climates.

Why is it? Camels evolved to be resilient, so they can adapt to conditions that would kill other animals.

I love to use camels as a metaphor for entrepreneurship in the current economy. In recent years, many of us embraced the "unicorn" mindset, hustling at all costs to disrupt our respective industries.

But during a global pandemic, rapid growth isn't as realistic as it once was. That growth-at-all costs perspective can only occur in the strongest economies — and right now, it comes with significant risk.

It's time for entrepreneurs to start thinking like camels instead of unicorns: To embrace the resilience and adaptability that come with slow growth. It might not be as exciting — and opting out of risk-taking isn't easy — but we'll only survive with a weather-proof approach.

Here are three, simple ways to boost your business' resilience so you can ensure your growth and success for the long-haul.

1. Embrace a slow-but-steady trajectory

Back in college, I had a friend whose parents paid for his entire degree. I was a bit envious at first, since I had to rely on scholarships and part-time jobs to carry me through those four years. But in the end, I'm grateful the money wasn't simply handed to me. I developed the work ethic that built my startup, gaining crucial skills like responsibility, initiative, and long-term planning.

That grit is also one major perk of building a business from the ground up. Yes, landing VC funding might be a fast way to grow your business. But it's not always the most promising way to ensure success over time – especially during a time of such economic uncertainty.

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I started JotForm long before the pandemic hit, but we still opted to bootstrap simply because it fit our mission as an organization. It was a slower process, to be sure, and it was admittedly difficult to watch other entrepreneurs gain momentum overnight.

But our choice to build on our own terms allowed us to do things the way *we* wanted: to make decisions that would improve our customers' lives for the long term and, in return, keep them coming back to us. The slow-but-steady process also helped us gain and sharpen skills we embrace to this day.

As venture capitalist and author Alex Lazalow put it, a long-term strategy allows time to "build the business model, find a product that resonates with the market, and develop an operation that can scale." Sure, the timing might not be

ideal. But it’s not about who gets to market first, as Lazalow notes. It’s about who *survives.*

2. Be strategic, not opportunistic

Entrepreneurship is often seen as pure opportunism: Simply come up with a great idea, then do everything you can to bring it to life. (Usually, that translates to finding a source of money.)

But for startup endeavors, I’m convinced real success is more about strategy than mere opportunity. Risk-taking is necessary for any new venture, but entrepreneurship without a map almost always leads to chaos, especially in such uncertain times like we’re living in now.

Keep in mind that strategy and opportunism aren’t mutually exclusive, and that planning ahead doesn’t mean you have to give up dreaming. In my experience, a firm understanding of your purpose actually *enables* innovation. No organization or group can innovate if they’re completely derailed.

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Think of your strategic plans as a protective buffer. “Ventures that lack strategic bounds try to do too much and spread themselves too thin,” writes author and Harvard lecturer David Collis. “Because they fail to concentrate their available resources, they can’t win in any key market.”

How can you create that buffer? One way is to hire the right people — folks who are energized about and invested in your vision, and who have realistic ideas about how to connect it with your target market, especially when barriers arise.

Secondly, don’t put all your eggs in one basket. It’s tempting to respond to an initial demand for your product or service, but staying focused on your target market from the start will protect you from making rash, derailing decisions.

Sometimes, that means adapting when things don’t go as planned. The used-car platform Frontier Car Group is a perfect example. Initially, they launched their service in five markets, but not all of them caught on. Faced with a tough choice, they shuttered the unsuccessful markets and instead focused their efforts on the successful ones.

It might sound counterintuitive, but only with boundaries in place will you be able to pivot to new opportunities when it matters most.

3. Hone in on your mission

Like most people, my family and I struggled to cope with our new lives in the early part of the pandemic. Life stuck at home indefinitely felt dismal, and it was at times difficult to muster up motivation to get things done each day. Even the hobbies and projects that once excited me.

Then, in a timely Zoom call with an old friend, I was reminded of something important: We all need a sense of purpose to persevere. When I considered my purpose as a husband, father, friend, and business leader, it was so much easier to stick with it in the trying times. Like gas in a car, a sense of meaning is what fuels us to keep going in new, uncharted territory.

I’m a firm believer that it’s much the same for businesses. Focusing on your purpose — the problem you set out to solve when you launched your startup, and the people whose lives you want to transform — is the most effective way to deal with difficulties. Because even when you take unexpected turns, one thing will stay constant: your purpose.

So instead of measurable metrics like sales and deadlines, focus instead on your organization’s mission and vision — and always use them as lenses to make difficult choices about how to move your organization forward.

I’ve found that remembering what you set out to do in the first place makes big problems manageable, because you always have a clear goal in mind: when things get hard, just do what you set out to do. After all, as Collis writes: “A firm evolves as the result of incremental choices made every day.”

It might take some time to emerge from the struggle or to expand your business to what you envisioned. But over time, you’ll see growth – the kind of growth that remains steady in every climate.

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